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FM AMEMBASSY COLOMBO ZDK RUEHCG #8393
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0396
INFO RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA PRIORITY 1845
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY 8865
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 7104
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 5091
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 3238
RUEHNW/AMEMBASSY OSLO PRIORITY 5048
RUEHOT/AMEMBASSY OTTAWA PRIORITY 1327
RUEHSM/AMEMBASSY STOCKHOLM PRIORITY 0585
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 4155
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 9449
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 6750
RUEHON/AMCONSUL TORONTO PRIORITY 1254
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 3681
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS PRIORITY
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000807

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INSB

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/15/2019

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PREF](#) [PHUM](#) [PTER](#) [EAID](#) [MOPS](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA'S FOREIGN MINISTER SEES "DEVOLUTION"
ONLY AFTER SPRING ELECTIONS

REF: SECSTATE 69680

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Classified By: CHARGE D'AFFAIRES JAMES R. MOORE. REASONS: 1.4 (B, D)

1.(C) SUMMARY: In apparent response to recent Washington statements on moving forward more quickly with political reconciliation, FM Bogollagama called in Charge to present detailed arguments as to why "devolution" had to wait until after presidential (January) and parliamentary (spring) elections. Charge presented the U.S. humanitarian benchmarks. FM responded that the GSL was doing well in meeting the benchmarks, but Charge underscored the importance of formulating strategic plans for IDP returns and demining. Bogollagama said a decision on the ICRC mandate rested with him but was sketchy on details other than to say the ICRC role would be different in the future. END SUMMARY.

CHARGE UNDERSCORES U.S. CONCERNs ON RETURNS AND RECONCILIATION

12. (C) On August 13, Foreign Minister Bogollagama called in Charge for a wide-ranging discussion, with emphasis on the issue of GSL plans on reconciliation. Although FM did not say so directly, his request for a meeting appeared to be in response to recent remarks on the issue of reconciliation in Washington by A/S Blake. The meeting opened with Charge reiterating U.S. concerns on the welfare and early return of IDPs. Charge noted that while the international community understood the importance of registering IDPs in the camps before release, it was also important to move as quickly as possible and suggested a partial release of those already registered. FM responded that 9,800, mostly elderly, IDPs had been released, but some had returned to the camps because they had no one to take care of them and no place to go.

13. (C) Charge also underscored the importance of moving forward as soon as possible with political reconciliation. He argued that the end of the war created an excellent

opportunity to heal the deep wounds that had plagued the country. President Rajapaksa's meetings with Tamil politicians and businessmen were encouraging, but we were disappointed that he and others in the GSL were now signaling that reforms would be delayed until after the next election. Sri Lankans had expectations to move forward sooner, he argued. Additionally, if Tamils saw no progress, they could become increasingly alienated and turn to terrorism.

NO DEVOLUTION UNTIL AFTER ELECTIONS

¶4. (C) Bogollagama conceded these were good points but then went into a lengthy monologue on why political reform -- which he called "devolution" -- would have to wait until after presidential and parliamentary elections. Devolution was part of the constitution and the GSL was committed to implementing it, he argued. The GSL would look at the many devolution proposals that were expected to come from the parliamentary committees. At the same time, however, the president needed to strengthen his political base in parliament before moving forward. The president's SLFP party only held 55 seats in parliament (NOTE: The actual number is 57 of 225 total seats. END NOTE). While he now had the support of coalition partners, past experience with the budget demonstrated that this support could evaporate under stress.

¶5. (C) The first step toward widening the president's base, according to FM, was presidential elections, which would be called in November for January. Parliamentary elections would then be called later in the spring. Bogollagama believed the president's party would win two thirds of the

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seats and would then be in a position to move forward with devolution. Charge pushed back, noting that the president right now commanded high popularity and that waiting until spring on political reform risked that strong popular support dissipating and Tamil discontent growing.

FM FAVORABLE ON BENCHMARKS, SKETCHY ON ICRC MANDATE

¶6. (C) Charge took the opportunity of the meeting to review briefly the benchmarks on dealing with the humanitarian situation approved by the Interagency Policy Committee (reftel). Bogollagama went down the list and believed the GSL was making significant progress in each area. Charge noted, however, the importance of a GSL strategic plan for the return of IDPs, which had not yet been forthcoming. Moreover, there was no overall plan for demining. He argued that both the GSL and the international community could better focus their efforts if they had these plans. On the ICRC mandate, the FM claimed the MFA had dealt with the issue and the decision on its redefined mandate rested with him. He provided no details but hinted that the ICRC would not "have the same role in the future." Its role, he said, would match the tasks that were still outstanding and some ICRC staff might have to leave.

REQUEST FOR MEETING WITH THE SECRETARY

¶7. (SBU) Bogollagama reiterated his request, which he said had already been passed to Department via the Sri Lankan Embassy in Washington, for a meeting with the Secretary in Washington during the period of September 22-30. FM would be in New York for the UNGA during that timeframe but preferred to meet the Secretary in Washington and would travel there at her convenience.

COMMENT

¶8. (C) Bogollagama's insistence that political reform must

wait until after presidential and parliamentary elections is disappointing but not surprising. We have been hearing some of the same arguments from others in the GSL, and this now appears to be the party line. The decision on the issue rests with President Rajapaksa, however, not the FM. We will look for opportunities to press the president to reconsider.

MOORE